Some Had Ribbons

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Some Had Ribbons

by clockheartedcrocodile

Summary

A lonely October night finds Sleepy Hollow's itinerant schoolmaster, William Graham, attending a country ball held by the wealthiest man in the valley. There he hears a most intriguing ghost story . . . one that will follow him home.

Notes

I’m changing up the tradition this year by writing a spooky Halloween fic that ISN’T part of my usual October Country set! I hope you enjoy!

The market town of Greensburgh lay in a spacious cove on the eastern shore of the Hudson, and a modest settlement of houses could be found cradled in a valley not two miles away. The atmosphere there was languid and plain, somewhat dreary, and the occasional chirp of a whippoorwill was remarked upon as an unusual disturbance of the peace. This town was called Sleepy Hollow.

In those days, a scholar was generally considered to be a man of good sense. His taste was expected to be vastly superior to that of the local layman, to say nothing of his education and politesse. The inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow had expected such things of their itinerant schoolmaster, and in this they were sorely disappointed.

William Graham arrived in late summer for the purpose of educating their children. He was a man of letters, and as such he was considered a gentleman, but he did not behave as any gentleman Sleepy Hollow had yet known. He was stern, quiet, and of disagreeable appearance. He rarely smiled. He was distant from his students, and he wore a pair of spectacles that made it difficult to meet his eye.

Graham plied his trade in an old log schoolhouse with the windows patched up with copybook leaves. The schoolhouse was situated by the edge of the forest, and the sound of the merrily running water in the creek nearby made more than one child yearn to be out at play. Each young scholar held out hope that one day, the low esteem in which their peculiar pedagogue was held would drive him away for good. He was an itinerant schoolmaster after all, and that meant he was always moving from place to place. Surely there were unfortunate children in Connecticut or Maryland whom he might serve better?

But he did not go, and no one could say why. Perhaps it was that certain quality of the air that drew strange folks to Sleepy Hollow. The inhabitants, descended one and all from the original Dutch, were given to visions and trances, strange beliefs, and idle curiosities. Some said that the town was cursed, others that the land itself had been cursed before Master Hendrick Hudson had ever set foot on it. The town abounded with twilight superstitions, and the very earth itself seemed troubled by nightmares.

William Graham was not well-liked, but nor was he wholly despised. It was not uncommon to find him drying his boots by the fire of many a farmhouse, sitting with the women at their sewing and conversing with them about all manner of horrors and goblins. The wives of that town, eager to hold the ear of a lettered man, filled his head with stories of spooks and phantasmagoria, and in turn Graham held them captive with recitations from Mather's *History of New England Witchcraft,* in which he believed extremely.

When he was not applying himself to his work in the schoolhouse, amusing farmers' wives with his company, or supplementing his meager pay with odd jobs about town, Graham boarded in a chilly one-room cabin on the far side of the brook. There he kept an old plow-horse called Gunpowder and a passel of wolfish dogs. He slept among these dogs in a cot of wool and furs, of a mind that should the cabin be approached in any direction, his dogs would leap to his aid, and he to the aid of his dogs. He was a nervous man.

Graham could not meet the eye of any Christian without feeling it an unwelcome intrusion. He jealously guarded the sacred spaces of his mind, and was not unaware of the maltreatment he would face if his thoughts were bared to the world. Perhaps it was for this reason that he boarded in this particular house. The forest lay thick and deep in that part of town, as though it meant to swallow the hovel entire, and Graham was obliged to walk the long, lonesome woodland road to and from the township with a great sense of unease in his heart.

Graham was often uneasy. He was a gaping wound of a man, prone to melancholy, and one would be hard-pressed to say if he considered himself a man at all. He was a nonentity worthy of neither attention nor interest. He regarded the stygian wilderness that surrounded his cottage with the exhausted wariness of a man who was born afraid and will die afraid.

One fear in particular had troubled Graham since the first night he heard the tale, and every night since. It was a yarn that could not help but dominate the imagination. If the peculiar valley of Sleepy Hollow was home to a hundred hobgoblins, then this hobgoblin was surely the prince of them all. I am speaking, of course, of the Galloping Hessian of the Hollow, or, as he was better known, the Headless Horseman.

Popular folklore would have you believe the spirit to be the ghost of a Hessian rider, long dead, whose head had been carried off by a cannon-ball and who now rides forth from his church-yard each night in search of his head. Nay says the milkmaid, attending the cow. He be a spirit of the October Country who never had but an empty place upon his neck. Nay says the judge, reviewing those accused. He be a creature of the pumpkin-patch, who holds a special enmity for all Christian souls. Nay says the parson, nay says the farmhand, and so on, and on, and on.

Thus the tale of the Galloping Hessian came to Graham's ear with a hundred facets, cut like a jewel until it shined. The hardships of the schoolroom were as nothing to the grotesqueries of his imagination. He rarely ate, and he slept without resting. His mind was preoccupied with phantasms and his bed had become a place of terror, sweat, and infection.

Now, at that time, Sleepy Hollow was home to a foreigner called Hannibal Lecter, who was a man of substantial means and great personal wealth. There was not a man in town who didn't envy him, for his wealth had come to him through a combination of luck and inheritance, and his prosperous land holdings were the envy of every farmer in the valley. Rumors persisted that he had been a loyalist- and a surgeon at that, proficient in both scalpel and bayonet- but despite this, he was admired both for his wealth and his foundling daughter, Abigail.

Lecter was reserved, but not private, and he was known to open his doors wide to all who would accept the invitation. He hosted grand, extravagant dances in his house upon the hill. Such parties were not to be missed. All in the town were welcome, from the wealthiest farmers to the men-of-all-work who plied their trade on Lecter's land.

It just so happened that in late October of that year, as Graham was presiding over his classroom, an invitation to such a party came to him from a young footman at the door. It was not the first time he had been invited, but it was the first time he did not decline; the threat of winter was cold in the air, and he had not eaten well in several days. It was commonly known in town that no one left Lecter's farm hungry, and so, as evening fell and painted the sky the

color of a pumpkin's blush, Graham was to be found saddling himself atop his plow horse, Gunpowder, and riding along the woodland road to Lecter's well-kept estate.

It was a long and wearying ride, and soon the soon the sun was but a bright smear of color, peering through the trees like a prying eye. It was in this failing light that Graham finally guided his horse along the winding path up, up, up to Lecter's house, which stood on a plateau high above the expanse of his acres. Here the way was lit with lanterns swaying in the autumn breeze, and other guests, some on foot and some on horseback, were beginning to arrive.

Graham looked about him with interest, surprised to find that the estate lived up to every tale. Lecter was a creature of whimsy, full of a carnal *joie de vivre* that Graham saw reflected back at him in the fields of rye and buckwheat, the buzzing of the late-season bees, the barnyards full of suckling pigs and Guinea fowl. The livestock, fattened for winter butchery, was nothing to the burgeoning harvest; broad expanses of ripening Indian corn, pumpkin-fields thick with vines and promising gourds, orchard trees abundant with apples that hung dripping from the leaf or lay heaped in barrels for the cider-press. It was the land of milk and honey, and all of it was Lecter's.

Graham's plow horse was led away at the gates and he approached Lecter's house on foot, unnoticed amid a group of six or seven others. Graham recognized several among them, for Sleepy Hollow was a quiet little town, and every face was known- there the magistrate, tall and solemn, and there the beekeeper with his apprentice, both half-drunk in anticipation of the night's festivities.

Upon entering the great hall that served as the heart of Lecter's house, Graham was brought up short by wonder. Candlelight flickered from every sconce, giving the whole room the warm, golden look of a bread oven. The floor had been cleared to grant a parade of laughing couples room to dance Sir Roger de Coverley. Dried fruits, wheat, and peppers of all kinds adorned the walls on woolen strings, and what little space remained was devoted to hunting trophies and fine animal skins.

All the people of the town had assembled in their Sunday frocks. The men wore bright calico and pewter-buckled shoes, and the ladies wore gowns and homespun petticoats. The more enterprising among them had dressed in autumnal costumes, giving themselves the sultry appearance of dryads in late fall.

Graham, in a threadbare black frock coat and stockings that had once been white, felt oddly shamed by this display of country beauty. He removed his cocked hat at the door and hung it on a peg. His hair was clubbed with a blue ribbon, and he allowed himself a moment to untie and re-tie it, feeling suddenly unsure of himself. He rubbed his wrists beneath his twice-turned sleeves. The group he had slipped inside with went at once to their business- the beekeeper to the banquet, steaming and laid out for all who might wish to partake, and the magistrate to dancing with his sickly wife- and after a long moment of waiting by the wall, Graham followed the beekeeper to the feast.

There was no one in all the country who might set a table as Hannibal Lecter could. Ham and smoked beef, preserved plums still swimming in sauces, fruit and cream with tea and candied chicken. Fine dishes had been stacked high with oat-cakes and honey-cakes, beside a

multitude of pies in apple, peach, and pumpkin. The whole was complimented with an array of sweet-smelling spices, teacakes frosted with bright orange preserves, boiled eggs, and cold, sour pickles. It made Graham's mouth water to see it all presented so prettily.

"You needn't restrain yourself," said a voice from behind him. "The meal is there to be eaten."

Graham started in surprised- it was a foreign voice, low and kind and liltingly curious- and when he turned he found himself standing before the evening's host. He bowed low. The gentleman did the same. "Sir, I thank you for your gracious invitation," said Graham, though he did not look his host in the eye. "Few would open their doors so readily, and to so many, for no great occasion."

Lecter was a tall man with good teeth and honey-colored eyes. His hair was cut unfashionably short beneath his wig and he wore a fine blue coat lined with silk the color of a candle flame. The frock had been embroidered with leaves and pumpkin vines, suggesting a daughter's careful hand.

Lecter's smile suggested a man who was very pleased with himself indeed, and who had never in life been dissatisfied by the world. Graham could not claim such a luxury, and at once he felt a prickle of unease raise the fine hairs on his neck.

"The party is its own occasion," Lecter said warmly. "I admit, I am not in the habit of denying myself when I have set my mind to a course of action . . . I can think of no greater pleasure than that of a well-set table. Unless, of course, it is the pleasure of sharing it with company."

"We are of a mind, then," said Graham. "Except the comment about the company."

"You are a solitary man, I take it?"

"When I am permitted. I regret that my duties do not more often relieve me from my schoolhouse."

"My daughter is a foundling who came to me many years ago," said Lecter, "and as I have been her tutor, you will not have met her. Abigail, come," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of laughter and dancing. "You must meet my honored guest, Mr. . . . Forgive me, but I do not know your name."

"William Graham."

"William," said Lecter. The corners of his eyes creased in a smile. "Ah, my daughter. Abigail, may I introduce Mr. Graham. He is the itinerant schoolmaster of our little village. Mr. Graham, my daughter, Miss Abigail Lecter."

Graham bowed low. "I am grateful, miss, for your father's hospitality."

Miss Lecter curtsied to him. She was a slim youth with a red velvet ribbon tied around her neck. She carried herself with the same pleased, well-fed satisfaction as her adoptive father.

Her cheeks were girlish with youth, and her pale skin spoke of a life harbored indoors out of the sun.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Graham,” she said. Her voice was cool and soft, like a moth’s wing. “How do you like my father’s house?”

Graham sniffed. “It is well enough.”

“Well enough?” A smile played about Miss Lecter’s lips. “It is the finest house in the valley.”

“You are very rude, Mr. Graham,” said Lecter, but there was no challenge in it, nor malice. He regarded Graham with great interest, and Graham began to feel more than a little disquieted. Lecter presided over his conversations the same way that he presided over his dinner parties; with great lordly dignity, as though he had set some forbidden fruit upon the plates of his guests and thrilled to find it eaten.

“I am polite enough for the farmers and carpenters whose sons require an education.”

“What is it that you educate them in?”

“I ensure that they’re lettered,” said Graham, “and I give them some small understanding of the foreign languages.”

“Latin?”

“When it is called for.”

“French?”

“I would not teach French, not for ten thousand a year. I have not the patience for it.”

“An extraordinary people, the French,” said Lecter. His eyes shone like cut jewels. “I have it on good authority that they are revolting against their king. Some say they are mad enough to start cutting off heads.”

Miss Lecter’s looped her arm into her father’s and hung upon him. “Father,” she said, “will you have them tell stories again?”

“Patience, daughter. Let them eat their fill.”

“I am tired of watching men eat. I will dance, until you finally relent and have our guests tell us stories,” said Miss Lecter, with a sort of airy, false dignity that Graham saw was intended to make her father laugh.

Lecter did not laugh, but he smiled with great warmth. He embraced her and kissed her hair. “Go and dance,” he said. “This party is for your sake as much as mine. Dance until morning if it pleases you.”

Graham removed his spectacles, polishing them on his handkerchief. *“Children, be afraid of going prayerless to bed, lest the Devil be your bedfellow,”* he murmured sourly. He was only

half aware of himself, his mind yet preoccupied with Lecter's introduction. He had not known Graham's name, yet he had known his profession. Were his clothes so worn as all that?

"An admirer of Mather, Mr. Graham?" said Lecter, turning back to him. "Are you an ardent believer in witches?"

Graham watched as Miss Lecter took the arm of a plain-faced Irishman in black and began to dance with him. Through the mingled murmur of conversation and music he watched her bring her lips to his ear, and say, "Handsomely, sir. Pray be very careful of my ribbon."

"I am not," lied Graham, returning his attention to Lecter, "though it would appear that every housewife from here to the Tappan Zee still believes that their wayward daughters will write their names in the Devil's book."

"Did not young Abigail Hobbs claim the Devil himself promised her fine things, if only she did as she was asked?" Lecter smiled. "*What would he have you do,* said the judge, and Miss Hobbs had but to say-"

"Why, he would have me be a witch," said Graham quietly.

Lecter's smile broadened. "A brave girl, to speak to her Puritan captors so."

"A dangerous girl," said Graham. "If you'll excuse me."

Thus removing himself from Lecter's company, Graham returned to the feast at hand. He watched, sometimes openly, as Lecter's gaze followed him about the room. Soon enough another guest- a spinster of Graham's acquaintance, sharp-minded but flush with drink- caught Lecter's eye. He offered her his arm and together they joined the dancing. The beekeeper and the magistrate were now well into their cups, and had struck up a raucous singing in the parlor. *"His door is always open found, his cider of the best, sir . . . his board with pumpkin pie is crowned, and welcome every guest, sir . . ."*

Such was Lecter's affluence that among the delicacies served Graham found clusters of candied pecans. He bit into one at first with caution, and then again with great interest, and all the while he looked about him at Lecter's property. It was a magnificent house. One might scarcely walk in out of the cold before feeling a certain lazy warmth overtake the limbs. The burning hearths and candle-lit pumpkins lent the whole room an intimate glow, and the smell of beer and salted caramel made Graham feel lazy and plump, though he had eaten comparatively little. The whole scene had an air of such festive wonder that Graham half-expected a knight to ride in, dressed entirely in green and offering a splendid woodcutting axe to the first man who dared strike off his head.

His sullen eyes followed Lecter's movements as he danced. He was an odd man, Graham reckoned. A foreigner, fixed in his tastes, who loved life almost unto a mania. He built himself a house with nothing boring or banal into it, scorning the baser elements as another man might scorn the stench of decay, yet openly invited common men into his house for reasons which Graham could not begin to guess.

I would like to know, Graham thought. He felt very strongly that, if they continued to talk, the inner workings of Lecter's mind would be made plain to him. He thought of dark forests and mirrored halls, and as he did, he felt a sudden sharp pain in his jaw. Graham put his hand to his mouth. It came away bloody. A bite of pecan had pierced his gums.

In time, Miss Lecter's wish was granted. Benches were pushed back to the wall, fresh tallows were lit, and the evening soon gave way to the telling of stories. Tales of the revolution, of which every storyteller was the hero, were the principal subject, but as the witching hour drew nearer, the air was filled with wicked stories to chill the blood.

The magistrate, knowing Graham to be an advocate of Mather, spoke in honeyed tones of a town not a week's ride north, where Hathorne, Stroughton and the rest had hanged nineteen souls for witchcraft. The twentieth they tortured with stones for three days, until at last his bones were crumbled into dust, and he expired. "But that was very nearly a century ago," he said, tenting his fingers, "and it would not do in our modern age."

"My patients would not have it so," said the madhouse keeper with a sly smile. "They tell me Mother Hulda, bewitcher of redcoats, still walks the shores of the Tappan Zee."

This talk of witches struck Miss Lecter as most amusing. Graham saw the way her face changed in the light. She listened with great eagerness to the other guests, rarely speaking herself, and once or twice Graham saw her fingertips stray to the red ribbon at her throat. The sight of it worried him, put him in mind of well-worn nooses and apple skins. He recalled the beekeeper singing in the parlor. *Some had ribbons red as blood all bound around their middles . . .*

"I suppose they also tip their hats to the Heer of Donder-Berg," said the pig farmer's sister. "I'll tell you a tale to shrivel your heart. A tale of a woman in white."

Graham told no stories, contenting himself to eat, and to scowl at Miss Lecter, and to observe the way her father's skin caught the firelight. The stories told were quite unlike the usual fireside fare. The parson spun tales of the October Country, where flowers bloomed from the chests of the dead. The pig farmer spoke of sailors drowned in the Hudson. Their ghosts rose like a mist upon the water, threatening to drown all men who disrespected them. The madhouse keeper spoke only of the war, and the great, climactic battle that had cost him the full use of his leg. By his account, he had been a close confidant of Washington himself, and had known all along that there had been something not quite right about that General Arnold.

"Benedict Arnold!" cried the beekeeper, now red in the face from too much drink. His apprentice offered a hand to steady him. He waved it off. "That poor fool will wish he'd never been born when John André comes knocking at his door. I tell you, here's the story . . ."

He talked at length, after many false starts and pauses for drink, about the sweet-smelling specter of John André, who had been hanged as a spy for being caught out of uniform. Oh, unlucky André! He put the noose about his own neck, and shook Tallmadge's hand before the end. The pit of a peach, which he held in his pocket the day they buried him, bloomed into a tree that knit its roots through his bones, cracking open his skull and suckling out the marrow

within. Ever since that day, that peach tree bore fruit out of season. October, the very month André had been hanged.

“Even now!” said the beekeeper, in real danger of falling from his chair in his excitement. “Even now his wailing spirit roams among the trees, weeping and lamenting his cruel fate. Only when justice comes to that wretch Arnold will his specter be laid to rest.”

“One wonders what strange fruits that tree must bear, and if they taste as sweet,” said Lecter, to a general murmur of disgust. Graham’s mouth twitched in grim amusement. Strange fruits indeed.

Then it was Miss Lecter’s turn to tell a tale, and the attention of her audience grew all the more rapt as she began the tale of the Headless Horseman, that famous specter of the hollow.

There was not a red-blooded American yet living who had not lived in fear of the Hessians. Their brutality was matched only by that of the highlanders. The *Jäger* were vicious, pack-like huntsmen, good with a rifle and quick with a knife. The cavalrymen had been known to bayonet patriots already surrendering on their knees. Mothers spun stories about them to frighten their children. *Behave, little one, or the blue-coated Hushman will eat you up.* It was said they had two rows of teeth, and that they ate the flesh of men.

Here in the valley, not so far from the Tappan Zee, one such Hessian had cut down countless patriots in battle before his head was struck from his shoulders by burning shot from one of Mr. Hamilton’s stolen 12-pounders. He became the Headless Horseman, who roamed the woods after dark and tethered his horse in Hell. Many claimed to have seen him- still others said they had heard his laugh- but he always vanished at the last, escaping into a flash of fire, or a wrinkle in the rain.

“Do you believe it, sir?” said the madhouse keeper, when Miss Lecter’s tale was through. He leaned forward in his seat and clasped his hands on the head of his cane. “You must. You have gone pale.”

Graham looked away. “I have heard of this spirit time and again, and always with a different accompanying tale. Some say it is a ghost. Others claim it to be a hobgoblin, or a ghoul, or a wight.”

Lecter laughed. “Perhaps it is not any of those things, though we can never truly know,” said he, with eyes quite warm in the candlelight. “He may be such a creature as Othello spoke of, when Shakespeare wrote, *the Cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.”*

Something in Lecter’s voice struck Graham as terribly odd, and he felt his spirit begin to wither. Perhaps it was the mingled vapors of the evening, or the closeness of the room, but Graham felt bile rising in his gorge. He curdled in his chair like milk, unnoticed by the surrounding audience. He felt ill.

A pendulum dropped in his mind- pink and ugly, not unlike the pendulum at the back of a man’s throat- and Graham’s thoughts were filled with visions of headless men, their bellies

splitting wide in leering grins. Ribs like teeth, but more numerous. Crammed together like tombstones, like candle tapers, like handfuls of copybook leaves.

Graham shook himself from this reverie and found himself sweating profusely. No one around him had seen; all eyes were fixed on the magistrate's wife, who was telling the tale of a local girl who had died from a wasting illness in infancy. Her spirit even now- but Graham did not listen. He clutched at the arms of his chair and pushed himself to standing.

Lecter's eyes had not left him, not for some time now. When had he begun to watch? Graham could not place it. He rose when Graham rose, and nodded politely at the magistrate's wife. "Mr. Graham," he said, as he followed Graham into the entry hall. "May I have a word?"

"You may not," said Graham shortly. His belly had begun to cramp terribly, and his hand strayed to it like a woman done up in a family way. He imagined the skin splitting under his hand. His bowels unfurling between his fingers like a dog's lolling tongue. "I am . . . I am due for an early morning. I must be gone."

Lecter's gaze darkened. He looked at Graham as though he could smell sickness, and the feeling of being so scrutinized made Graham's stomach turn. "Stay a little longer," he said. "We have hardly begun telling stories. Besides, it won't do to ride home at this hour. You're liable to get lost on these back roads. The darkness-"

"I shan't be lost," said Graham shortly. "I know the way well, and Gunpowder knows these woods even better than I."

A cry of laughter from the other room- the beekeeper's apprentice had made a witty *bon mot*. Lecter's gaze flickered to the open door. He turned and whistled, quite unexpectedly, and a young man no older than thirteen came to the parlor door and stood uncertainly upon the threshold. "Bring Mr. Graham's horse to the gates."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Matthew," said Lecter, inclining his head as though to an equal. Matthew performed an awkward bow. "Fetch him a lantern as well," and here he returned his attention to Graham, smiling. "It would not do to be caught without one on a night like this."

"Just so," said Graham, coloring. He had entirely forgotten a lantern. So great was his discomfort that he had been prepared to run out into the darkness without one.

The boy, Matthew, nodded and made for the front door. It was quite heavy, built of wood and iron, and Graham had to help him scrape it open. Graham looked back at Lecter after Matthew darted out into the night. Lecter's smile had not changed.

"Something to eat, before you go?" he said.

"There is no need-"

"I insist," said Lecter, with a grace that brooked no argument. "I will fetch it for you myself."

“Thank you, sir. That is very kind of you,” said Graham weakly, and the moment Lecter had left the room, he was out the door.

Down the stairs to the walk, down the walk to the gate. He was sweating now, and he didn’t know why. It was a cold October evening, very late and very inhospitable. The ritual of mounting his horse, thanking Matthew, wrapping the reins around his hands- all of these served to calm Graham’s nerves.

He could not explain it. He felt like a spooked animal, but he could not set his mind on what had spooked him. Graham could see Lecter’s house from the front gate, looming too large and proud to be missed even in such darkness. Candles flickered in the windows. They looked like bright eyes, watching him.

Graham clucked at his horse and turned him away, back towards the long road home. The lanterns that had lit the way to Lecter’s had been reduced to stubby lumps of wax now. Graham’s lantern, containing a freshly lit taper, afforded him only a meager circle of light as he descended the road into the woods.

The lit windows of Lecter’s house lingered in Graham’s mind for a long time after they had passed out of view. What a bright chaos that party had been . . . The same bright chaos, Graham suspected, that Lecter believed inhabited the very heart of the world. Well, there his views and Graham’s could never be reconciled. Graham saw a dark order at the center of the universe. The very darkest of orders, one that the old witchfinder generals saw all too clearly.

Graham’s imagination wandered to Miss Lecter, and he shuddered. He recounted the rites of witch-hunting to himself, running through them again and again. *Bell, that thy deeds be public. Book, that thy works be done by the authority of Christ. Candle, that the accused may be purified by fire.*

Strange to think that such a very odd girl had become intimate with Lecter. Stranger still to think that in so short a time, Lecter had become intimate with Graham himself. The thought made Graham’s lip curl; for all his fine clothes, and lavish parties, Lecter struck him as a strange and pitiful thing. Half-formed, like child born before its time. It was a contempt born of familiarity. Graham *knew* Lecter. He had no wish to.

Graham caught only brief glimpses of the moon as the clouds passed over it one by one. Soon the bare branches tangled above him, obscuring his view entirely. The lantern he’d hooked to the saddle of his plow-horse bounced with every step. The candle flickered.

Darkness seemed to close in around him. The road home smelled of oak and pine, and the faint scent of decay. Beneath that, but growing stronger all the while, Graham could smell candied peaches.

“But when Ephraim, he came home, he proved an errant coward . . .” Graham murmured uneasily, to keep his mind off the encroaching silence. In the darkness above him he saw a cluster of almond-shaped leaves. *“He wouldn’t fight the Frenchmen there . . . for fear of being devoured . . .”*

Fat clusters of peaches shone in the darkness like precious jewels. It was an old tree, spindly and graying, but the leaves were vibrantly green compared to their dying counterparts. It was just on the edge of the road. Graham couldn't think how he'd failed to see it before.

He tried to recall what Lecter's dinner had tasted like. He couldn't remember.

Gunpowder nickered softly beneath him as he reached up and tore a peach free. He smelled it, then bit into it without ceremony. It dripped wetly down his chin and onto his collar. *Strange fruits,* Graham thought, gazing down at the exposed sliver of pit. It was odd to see it bloom in October. Autumn was not the season for peaches.

The road home was longer than Graham remembered. The wind was unseasonably cold, whipping at his coat and hat and scattering dead leaves in his path. More than once he heard the rustling of animals in the underbrush, and flinched when he saw the lantern light reflect the gleaming eye of an animal. Here in the darkness, wild fancies took him. Every oaken groan was the fish-eyed witch of the Hudson Highlands, and every whistling wind was the gnashing teeth of a ghoul.

Graham gripped the reins of his plow-horse as though strangling the neck of a rabbit. The taste of peaches was still strong in his mouth, but still he hummed, trying to calm his nerves by singing under his breath. *"Yankee Doodle came to town . . . for to buy a firelock . . ."*

A low-hanging branch brushed across his sleeve and Graham shrunk back into his coat, stiff with fear. Slowly, he relaxed. *"We will tar and feather him . . ."* he sang uneasily, unhooking the lantern to hold it up against the darkness. *"And so we will John Hancock . . ."*

Behind him- a snapping branch. Leaves rustling as the wind disturbed the trees. Graham twisted in his saddle so sharply that he nearly dismounted. Nothing behind him but the darkness, and the gleam of a raccoon's eye.

Breath upon the back of his neck. Hot and damp and animal, like the snorting of a horse.

Panic shot through Graham like a musket ball. He struck Gunpowder with his heels, urging him into a clumsy sprint through the trees. His mind had whited-out with fear. He felt it, *he felt it,* the horsebreath upon his neck, and behind him even now he heard the thunderous hoofbeats of his pursuer. Not the witch of the Hudson, who was an enemy to the English alone, and not the specter of poor maligned André, who smelled sweet as sin. Graham looked over his shoulder, eyes wild and only half-seeing, and there he saw him. The galloping Hessian himself, who died in battle and tethered his horse in Hell . . . *the Headless Horseman!*

Graham closed his eyes and clung to his horse's neck, denying it even to himself. Yet he had seen it- that dark stranger, streaked with mud and gore and reeking of death, mounted upon a horse that snorted fire with every breath and bristled all over with raven feathers. Where his head had been . . . his head . . . but Graham could not think about it now, must not think about it now. He clung to Gunpowder's neck and gritted his teeth, urging his horse onward. Gunpowder was blind with panic now and he tore through the trees at incredible speed, but a plow horse could not hope to outrun a war horse, and they would surely be overtaken. Branches whipped at Graham's face, cutting his cheek. He thought wildly of Mather. *The*

children of New England have secretly done many things that have been pleasing to the Devil . . . They say that in some towns it has been a usual thing . . .

The Horseman rode with an agility and speed Graham had only ever seen in war. Though the sound of the stampeding charger thundered in his head, making his ears ring and his skin prickle all over, its hooves did not disturb the ground where it galloped. In fact, to Graham's astonishment, the Hessian and his mount seemed to ride *through* the trees rather than between them, as though insubstantial in form if not in visage.

"Leave me be!" Graham cried. He was afraid, and beneath that fear was anger. "The war is over! The war is-"

Pain tore the words from his throat and he hit the ground before he knew what happened. Graham gasped in pain and clutched at his head; a tree branch had struck him. Blood dripped down into his eyes. Dimly, Graham saw the shape of his horse lurching away through the trees.

A wild burst of fire shattered the darkness and the Horseman's stallion reared up over him, kicking its legs and scattering leaves. Graham couldn't breath. He scrambled backwards, bruising his hands on thick oak roots as hooves flashed overhead. Ugly black sutures had been sewn across the horse's belly, clumsily holding together folds of leathery flesh. Graham thought wildly of ribs and teeth, of a horse's belly swallowing a man whole and vomiting him back out.

Graham's back hit the trunk of a tree. He felt the knots of the wood dig hard into his lower back.

The rider's coarse blue uniform was soiled with blood and graveyard dirt. His horse was a skeletal, moth-eaten thing that stamped and raged like an angry bull. The Horseman dismounted easily, handling it as though it were little more than Graham's plow horse, and stood over Graham's shivering form with musket in hand. The bayonet gleamed in the light of the horse's breath. A faint curl of smoke spilled from between his shoulders.

Graham's heart beat rabbit-fast in his chest. He was aware of how very dark it was, and how cold.

The Horseman touched the point of the bayonet to Graham's chest. Graham felt the metal scrape the buttons of his waistcoat.

Words would not come. Graham's mouth hung open in blind, senseless fear. He watched, uncomprehending, as the Hessian trailed the blade down, down, down to Graham's belly. The touch was too delicate to pierce the cotton.

The Horseman knelt over him, still with the blade to his belly, still with that wisp of smoke curling up and up from the desecrated neck. It smelled of cannon smoke and burning hair. It smelled of Lecter's house.

Something moved beneath the coarse material of the Hessian's uniform. Something like an opening mouth.

Graham screamed and the bayonet thrust home.

The first thrust was slow, difficult. Then it slid in easier. Graham felt the cold October wind touch some strange, unknown place inside of him and the feeling made him want to vomit. He tried to suck in air but his lungs throbbed uselessly. The Horseman was looking at him. He was *watching.*

The cold sting of metal on his fingertips was the first indication Graham had that he'd taken hold of the blade. He stared with tear-stung eyes at the place where the Horseman's head should be. He did not look down. Graham knew that if he did, he would see a gaping mouth. The wet, bubbling blood where the bayonet had forced a throat into his belly.

He gripped the bayonet hard enough to cut his palm and pushed it deeper.

Graham didn't look away when he did it. He kept his eyes on the Horseman even as his breath failed him, and his screams refused to come. *I deserve this,* he thought, privately, madly. He felt his mind begin to unravel. *I deserve this.*

The Horseman was better than Mather. More *beautiful* than Mather, and more terrible. Graham's face was a twisted rictus of pain. It was almost a smile. When the Horseman pulled out the blade, Graham thought he would twist it.

He wanted him to twist it.

The bayonet looked wet in the dim firelight. The Horseman threw it aside as though Graham's blood was inconsequential and unslung a woodcutting axe from where it hung strapped to his back. It was an ordinary thing. The sort one might find in any farmhouse.

Graham closed his eyes. He didn't pray.

He never felt the chop.

Someone was laughing downstairs. Graham could hear them through the floor. The tiny, distant clinking of glasses. Music. Sir Roger de Coverley.

Opening his eyes felt like peeling skin. Graham closed them again, wincing, then cracked them open to slits. He stared at the ceiling above him. There were soft cotton sheets under his hands. A bed, then, but not his own. Lecter's. The curtains were drawn, lit only by the lights downstairs creeping in through the cracks in the floorboards. He could hear the wind, but couldn't see it.

Graham touched his belly and flinched from his own hand. He touched his throat. His fingertips trembled on the red ribbon there.

His skin felt cold as death.

Rest, he thought, in a voice like Lecter's. *Rest. Eat. Heal.*

Slowly, Graham pushed himself into a sitting position. The sutures in his belly drew taut, tugging at a grievous and mortal wound. He probed the wound again, and didn't flinch. He felt no blood.

Graham felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh.

No one heard him, of course. They were still telling stories downstairs. There was nothing to do but wait. Wait until the party was over, and Lecter returned to his room. Then Graham could kill him. Then Graham could eat him.

There was a terrible pain in his neck.

Graham waited for Lecter to come up the stairs, and as he waited, he smiled.

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